

5 Pentecost
July 5, 2009
Fr. Bill McGinty

“The Bishop is an Octopus”

This week, the second week of July 2009 twelve members of the diocese, six clergy and six lay people, plus our Bishops Paul and Jack, will leave for the National Convention of the Episcopal Church in Anaheim, California.

There, united with all the Bishops of our church and led by the presiding Bishop, they will conduct the business of the church. The delegates are not elected, rather they are appointed. The reason for this is that we are not a congregational church, but we are an apostolic church with a hierarchical structure. We are a church of bishops that believes that it derives its authority from the Apostles, and through the Apostles, from Christ himself, as seen in today’s Gospel.

“He called the twelve and began to send them out two by two, and gave them authority over unclean spirits.”

Knowing the difference between being a congregational church and an “Apostolic Church” is important, because we believe that the sacraments and the ministry of Christ continues through the Apostles, and now the Bishops, we are obligated to recognize in our Bishop the authority of Christ and the teaching medium of the church. Subsequently, when the Bishop speaks we listen.

How much greater is that teaching authority when the whole church gathers. At Convention the first few days will be spent in prayer. The prayer of the church will be that the Holy Spirit guides, instructs and leads the Bishops and the delegates, in all their discussions and decisions.

Episcopalians believe in infallibility. Not the infallibility of a Pontiff or a Bishop or an individual speaking or acting on their own, but the infallibility of the Holy Spirit the third person of the Godhead.

Therefore, it follows that guided by the Spirit, united in prayer, the Bishops and delegates have a God given authority to lead us and teach us in the ways of the Gospel.

You might think that the work of the convention, its authority and its decisions are far removed from the life of a small parish in Pike County Pennsylvania.

I tell you today, that that is simply not so. For the teaching of General Convention to merely remain on paper in the minutes of the 2009 Convention and not see the light would be wrong and a sin against the Holy Spirit.

The Bishop and our delegates will return heavy with teaching. It will be poured out at every clergy day and at our pre-diocesan convention meetings. Delegates to convention in October will be asked to discuss these motions on the Friday of convention, and vote on them as a body on the Saturday, October 10th.

A Bishop is like an Octopus. Yes, you heard me correctly. A Bishop is like an Octopus. He may reside in one place, he may even move around in the diocese from time to time, but he cannot be all places at once. However, just like an Octopus the Bishop has tentacles or arms that reach out to every corner of the diocese and to every one of his parishes. His arms are his clergy and through them he feeds and teaches his people. The authority and the ministry of Christ that the Bishops holds, through apostolic succession, is administered for the Bishop in the parish by the priest he “laid hands on,” and called the Holy Spirit down upon. In truth, it should be the Bishop who baptizes, but he cannot be here at our whim or call. He delegates Christ ministry and he delegates it to his priest. We are so used to calling our Rector, our Priest or our Pastor that sometimes we forget he is first the Bishop’s priest.

The Parish Priest is not an Octopus. He only has two arms and two legs. He does not have the resources of the bishop and he is not usually as smart. Unkind people might say that he is the sucker on the end of a long tentacle. But the truth is that the Priest is the means by which the authority and teaching of the Bishop is heard, sacraments are administered, and God’s people are served.

In every good parish the priest has one strong asset to help him with God’s work. That asset is his Vestry. In the Canons of our church the first job prescribed for a parish Vestry is to advise, guide and assist the priest in his pastoral duties and leadership of the parish, and to take ownership of all ministries in the church that will benefit God’s people and lead to their spiritual growth in this life and eternal salvation in the next. The duties and obligations of a Vestry member are a sacred trust; because in their hands lies the salvation of peoples souls. There are no easy jobs on a Vestry. There is simply God’s work that must be done. If anyone neglects it the burden falls to another or to the priest with the two arms.

A congregation should cherish and support its Vestry. They should pray for the Vestry every day. They should help each Vestry member by volunteering for committee work and Ministry projects, albeit worship or fund raising.

I don’t think of a Vestry as an Octopus. I think of a Vestry as a great fishing net that is cast out on the sea of our community. Working together they bring salvation and God’s grace to many. Working together they fulfill the mission of the church and its Bishop.

You know, a net is just a bunch of holes tied together by cord. If any one of them detaches itself, it is just a hole, and fairly useless. But together that net can achieve so much. Jesus walks along the shore of the Sea of Galilee and he sees fishermen mending their nets and he calls them to follow him, because he has work for them to do. He tells them: “Up to now, you have been catching fish, but I need you to catch

men. I need you to save souls. I need you to teach people how to become children of God.” That is what a Vestry does.

This year I seem to have spent a lot of time holding the hands of people dying, praying with the very sick and counseling the troubled. You can do that work as a priest if you have a strong Vestry, because you know that even in the hours you are not in the office, God’s work is being done by good men and women. We need people to step forward for Vestry in the coming year. There are three requirements; One that you support your church, two that you attend on a regular basis and three that you love your church and God’ work with all your heart. Fulfill those criteria and you will be that saving net that brings Christ to others.

We are not a congregation church, we are an Apostolic church and each of us is called to be an Apostle and is sent out into the community. It is because we are not a congregation church that we have built into our Canons ways by which the voice of the laity may be heard by the Vestry, the Priest and even the Bishop. Vestry meetings are open. Most committee meetings are open. The Rector has an office. His telephone number is available as is the Wardens in every bulletin and Cobblestone. Your Vestry implores you to make them aware of your opinions, feelings and ideas. The structure is there. The means are available, but which of us can expect to be heard if we ourselves have not been regular in our attendance, support the church or love the beautiful Anglican tradition in which we stand? A good Vestry will always listen, but it will also stand together for the mission of the church, the welfare of its people’s spiritual life, and behind the teaching of its bishop.

Today we all need to thank our Vestry for doing all those things. Neither I as you Priest nor they as your Vestry can be effective without your love, prayers and support. That support and prayer is important. For every one thing that we can find wrong in our church, there are 100 that are right, good and wonderful. And for every voice that is critical there are 100 that sing God’s praises and know the work, sweat, blood and tears that has lifted this congregation along the path of growth and goodness in recent years. Let not the praise of fellow churches, community leaders, Milford people and clergy and people of the Bethlehem Diocese be the only voices to be heard lauding the resurrection and good work of Good Shepherd, Milford. Rather let us, know, deep in our hearts, the worth and sacredness of the work we have done and continue to do in this place.

Love your church and love today each person who weekly stands with you before the Altar of God. Let us go to our graves saying: “We were not perfect, but we were together and together we were that net that brought salvation to others and to one another.”

Today, on this 5th day of July 2009, let us resolve to pray daily for our Bishops and delegates at General Convention in October. Pray for your Vestry. Tell them you appreciate their hard work and effort. Make their work easier by volunteering to help. Make your treasurer’s work easier by increasing your pledge, or if you don’t pledge, resolve to begin pledging. This week ‘hug a Vestry member’ tell them you appreciate them. Even send them a card.

“So they went out and proclaimed that all should repent. They cast out demons, and anointed without many who were sick and cured them.”

Amen+